



NEWS RELEASE

For immediate use

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Contact information: See below

LEGISLATORS CROSS LINES TO HOST LOCAL FOODS ADVOCATE

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's leading "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" expert will speak at a bi-partisan, bi-state forum hosted by two area lawmakers.

Elanor Starmer, USDA's national coordinator and advisor for local and regional food systems, will keynote a public meeting set for 7 p.m. Thursday, January 28, at the Sinsinawa Mound Center, Sinsinawa, WI.

The free event is a joint venture by State Rep. Chuck Isenhardt (D-Dubuque) and State Rep. Travis Tranel (R-Cuba City), with assistance from Dubuque County ISU Extension and Grant County Economic Development Corporation.

"Elanor comes highly recommended by U.S. Agriculture Secretary and former Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack," according to Isenhardt. "She will highlight the experience of other communities focusing on diversified local food systems and discuss the federal programs available to support development in the tri-state area."

"As a dairy farmer, I see the growth potential for sustainable agriculture in the driftless region," Tranel said. "The landscape that northeast Iowa and southwest Wisconsin share is perfectly suited for smaller-scale producers growing a wide range of foods for regional markets, leading to the creation of all sorts of related jobs. There is room for everybody in agriculture who's interested."

Isenhardt is ranking member on the Environmental Protection Committee in the Iowa House and a member of the Economic Growth Committee, as well as the Agriculture and Natural Resources Appropriations Subcommittee.

Tranel serves on the Wisconsin Assembly's Agriculture and Small Business Development committees. He also chairs the Committee on Tourism. "When coupled with a vibrant local food system, agritourism is a fast-growing part of the tourism industry that brings visitors to farms, food businesses and rural America," Tranel noted.

Isenhart and Tranel have teamed up in the past. "We met each other officiating basketball games when Travis was paying his way through college," Isenhart said. "We worked well together on the court and had a lot of fun, so working across state boundaries and party lines has been a snap."

In her role, Starmer guides the Obama Administration initiative that has resulted in the expansion of farmers' markets, food hubs, food policy councils, farm-to-school programs, institutional procurement mechanisms and other marketing innovations that more directly connect consumers and producers.

"In the process, beginning farmers find entry points into agriculture and experienced farmers diversify their sales by responding to consumer demand to capture more of the food dollar," Starmer said, previewing her presentation. "Small businesses develop new processing, distribution and retail branding opportunities. People learn more about where their food comes from and gain access to fresher, healthier foods."

Prior to joining USDA in 2011, Starmer worked on agriculture, food and development policy issues for over a decade with nonprofits in Washington, DC, Minnesota and California. Originally from a small farming community in New Hampshire, she has master's degrees in agriculture science and policy from Tufts University and development economics from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

The public forum at Sinsinawa Mound is part of a two-day visit by Starmer. She also will be participating in stakeholder discussions in Dubuque with economic development leaders, educators and health specialists, as well as farmers and other business people directly engaged in the food supply chain.

Anyone working in those occupations interested in participating in one of the small group breakouts can get details by contacting Carolyn Scherf of Dubuque County ISU Extension (cscherf@iastate.edu) or Ron Brisbois of Grant County Economic Development Corporation (gcedc@grantcounty.org).

Starmer will be accompanied by Bill Menner, USDA state director for rural development in Iowa, who will be available to discuss his agency's programs.

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